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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [AF](#) [GM](#)
SUBJECT: SPD CHAIR GABRIEL SAYS NO SPD MAJORITY FOR MORE
COMBAT TROOPS IN AFGHANISTAN; STRESSES TRAINING

REF: BERLIN 38

Classified By: Deputy Chief of Mission Greg Delawie for
reasons 1.4 (b,d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Social Democratic Party Chair Sigmar Gabriel told the Ambassador in a January 12 meeting that building stability in Afghanistan before troop reductions begin in 2011 will require greater attention to training Afghan troops and police, and that sending more combat troops is not as important. Gabriel criticized the German government's approach, accusing it of not taking a clear position and avoiding open debate. He argued that because some 80 percent of the German public oppose the deployment in Afghanistan, the government must explain the need for any prolongation of its current level of engagement. Within this political context, Gabriel said in confidence that while he understands President Obama's argument, his party cannot accept an increase in combat troops. Gabriel noted that the SPD will hold a public conference January 22 for a fulsome discussion on Afghanistan, and he welcomed possible USG participation. This conference begins a month-long SPD deliberation process on Afghanistan ending in a party vote on a policy declaration. End summary.

2011 Target Means Focus Must Be On Training

¶2. (C) In a January 12 meeting at SPD national headquarters, Gabriel told the Ambassador that the USG's 2011 target date for beginning troop withdrawal from Afghanistan is a clear signal that Germany also will have to reduce its deployment at that time. He added that it also means that efforts must focus on stabilizing the country in the interim. The SPD view is that to accomplish this, more needs to be done to train Afghan troops and police and that "it is not so important to send combat troops." (Note: Gabriel specifically used the word "combat." End note.) Gabriel added that in his mind the biggest danger is that the instability spreads to Pakistan. He said that in this context, it is important to see what more can be done to strengthen tribal leaders who oppose al Qaida. These tribes "may not be our best friends," he noted, but they could help prevent the construction of terrorist bases as well as the destabilization of Pakistan. It may not be realistic to engage in nation-building in Afghanistan, he added. The Ambassador noted that the USG views combat troops as well as trainers as being important to the strategy and that a comprehensive approach is necessary.

SPD Cannot Support Troop Increase

¶3. (C) Gabriel said that some 80 percent of the German public oppose Germany's military deployment in Afghanistan. Therefore, the government will need to explain to the public why it is necessary to either prolong the deployment or seek more troops. Within this political context, Gabriel said that it is not possible for a majority within the SPD to

support more than the 4,500 mandated troops in Afghanistan. He confided in the Ambassador that while he understands President Obama's argument, Germany has no majority for a troop increase (comment: Gabriel is likely referring to a Bundestag majority. End comment.) Gabriel said he doubts that the government "will come to the Bundestag with this idea" and that "Westerwelle won't do this....I'd be astonished." Gabriel noted that in 2001, it was a major undertaking to obtain a majority in the Bundestag to send troops. He added that the Karzai government is not easy to support. Gabriel added that even if the number of troops remains at 4,500, there is still the need to explain to the public why the deployment is still needed and that withdrawal will not end in 2011. "A majority want withdrawal tomorrow," he said. He called for an open discussion even if the deployment is not increased. Gabriel noted that this is one of the biggest foreign policy issues Germany faces and that the right bench marks and strategy are needed.

¶4. (C) The Ambassador noted that a clear case can be made as to why the deployment is in Germany's interest and that President Obama has made the case to the U.S. public as well.

We understand that the solution is far from being just a military one. For President Obama, the military is weighed more heavily because of the need for a responsible transition. He stressed the importance of this effort, asking for whatever assistance Gabriel could provide. Gabriel asked the Ambassador whether President Obama would also have supported sending in troops in 2001 if he had been President at the time, to which the Ambassador responded positively.

SPD to Host Conference on Afghanistan

¶5. (SBU) Gabriel accused the government of not having a clear position on Afghanistan and of not wanting an open public debate. In this context, Gabriel said that the SPD will be hosting a public conference on Afghanistan on January 22 with the aim of promoting an open, honest discussion of Germany's interests there. He said that the Aspen Institute and German Marshall Fund will provide speakers and other experts will participate but he questioned whether other representation would be helpful. He asked the Ambassador if any USG speakers could be provided. He said that the conference format will be similar to a hearing. Gabriel said that the conference will be followed by a meeting of the SPD's executive board which will prepare a policy declaration on Afghanistan. This declaration will then be submitted to the party and feedback will be solicited, and then a final declaration will be submitted to the party membership for a vote. Gabriel anticipated that the SPD should have a final declaration by the end of February. The Ambassador said he appreciated the SPD effort to have an open discussion on the issue and offered to see whether an appropriate USG official could attend. Gabriel also noted that he will be visiting Afghanistan at the end of February or beginning of March.

Comment

¶6. (C) In a January 13 interview in the Sueddeutsche Zeitung, Gabriel also accused the government of not having articulated an Afghanistan strategy, with only Defense Minister zu Guttenberg having addressed the approach. When asked directly if the SPD rejects sending more combat troops in favor of focusing on more police and military training, Gabriel did not emphatically reject a troop increase but said it is clear that more trainers are needed. He noted, however, that it must first be determined whether these trainers could come from the current 4,500 deployment. If the government calls for more troops, he said, it must justify this in the Bundestag. Asked whether he rejects President Obama's strategy of building up troops, he answered indirectly, questioning whether stronger military engagement would have brought more security to Afghanistan.

¶7. (C) While Gabriel made fairly emphatic statements that

the SPD cannot support an increase in troops, especially given the public mood, it is still open as to whether the party would support an increase of military and police trainers, as was expressed in the abovementioned interview. Gabriel was also careful to stress that Germany's NATO partners can trust the SPD's foreign policy and that it will be responsible. Taken together, there may be some wiggle-room wherein with USG input at the January 22 conference and taking advantage of other opportunities for exchange over the next month, the SPD may be more open to sending additional troops engaged in training. This is, however, subject to the broader rank-and-file SPD views shared over the next month in the party's deliberation process. These views will be instructive since Gabriel pledged as new party chair that the leadership will seek out and pay more attention to the rank-and-file. End Comment.

MURPHY